A Deal with the Taliban?

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My Life with the Taliban
by Abdul Salam Zaeef, translated from the Pashto and edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Feliz Kuehn.

1.

For thirty years Afghanistan has cast a long, dark shadow over world events, but it has also been marked by pivotal moments that could have brought peace and changed world history.

One such moment occurred in February 1989, just as the last Soviet troops were leaving Afghanistan. Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze had flown into Islamabad—the first visit to Pakistan by a senior Soviet official. He came on a last-ditch mission to try to persuade Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the army, and the Interservices Intelligence (ISI) to agree to a temporary sharing of power between the Afghan Communist regime in Kabul and the Afghan Mujahideen. He hoped to prevent a civil war and lay the groundwork for a peaceful, final transfer of power to the Mujahideen.

By then the Soviets were in a state of panic. They ironically shared the CIA's analysis that Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah would last only a few weeks after the Soviet troops had departed. The CIA got it wrong—Najibullah was to last three more years, until the eruption of civil war forced him to take refuge in the UN compound in April 1992. The ISI refused to oblige Shevardnadze. It wanted to get Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the seven disparate Mujahideen leaders and its principal protégé, into power in Kabul. The CIA had also urged the ISI to stand firm against the Soviets. It wanted to avenge the US humiliation in Vietnam and celebrate a total Communist debacle in Kabul—no matter how many Afghan lives it would cost. A political compromise was not in the plans of the ISI and the CIA.

I was summoned to meet Shevardnadze late at night and remember a frustrated but visibly angry man, outraged by the shortsightedness of Pakistan and the US and the clear desire of both governments to humiliate Moscow. He went on to evoke an apocalyptic vision of the future of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region. His predictions of the violence to come turned out to be dead right.

At that pivotal moment, if Shevardnadze's compromise had been accepted, the world might well have avoided the decade-long Afghan civil war, the destruction of Kabul, the rise of the Taliban, and the sanctuary they provided al-Qaeda. Perhaps we could have avoided September 11 itself—and much that has followed since, including the latest attempt by a Nigerian extremist to blow up a transatlantic airliner, the killing of seven CIA officers at an Afghan base, and the continuing heavy casualties among NATO troops and Afghan civilians in Afghanistan.

With Obama's controversial and risk-laden plan to first build up and then, in eighteen months, start drawing down US troops in Afghanistan, every nation and political leader in the region now faces another pivotal moment. At stake is whether the US and its allies are willing to talk to the Afghan Taliban, because there is no military victory in sight and no other way to end a war that has been going on for thirty years.

When that moment comes—as it must—will the US and NATO be ready to talk with the Taliban or will they be internally divided, as they are now? Will President Hamid Karzai have the credibility to take part in such talks and deliver on an agreement that might be reached? Will the ISI demand that their own Taliban protégés return to power? Will the Taliban hard-liners, now scenting victory, even agree to talks and, as a consequence, be prepared to dump al-Qaeda? Or will they sit out the next eighteen months waiting for the Americans to begin to leave?

2.

The Afghan Taliban are now a country-wide movement. During the last year they expanded to the previously quiet west and north of Afghanistan. Their leadership has safe havens in Pakistan. Casualties on all sides have risen dramatically. According to the UN, in 2009 there were an average of 1,200 attacks a month by Taliban or other insurgent groups—a 65 percent increase from the previous year. Over the twelve-month period, 2,412 Afghan civilians were killed, an increase of 14 percent; of those, two thirds were killed by the Taliban, a 40 percent increase. In addition, US and NATO combat deaths rose 76 percent, from 295 in 2008 to 520 in 2009.

Adding to the challenges facing the Afghan government, only 3 percent of recruits joining the Afghan army are from the Pashtun belt in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban are dominant, according to Lieutenant General Bill Caldwell, who is leading the US training mission in Afghanistan; even so, the Taliban have infiltrated parts of the Afghan army and police—the key components of the US plan to start the handover of power to local forces by July 2011. In large parts of Afghanistan, development programs have come to a halt and nearly half of the UN staff assigned to Afghanistan have been relocated to Dubai and Central Asia because of security concerns.

According to Major General Michael Flynn, the NATO military chief of intelligence in Afghanistan, the Taliban now have shadow governors in thirty-three out of thirty-four provinces—they serve to organize the movement at a provincial level and disrupt government initiatives in their area—and the movement "can sustain itself indefinitely." Flynn has described US intelligence in Afghanistan as "clueless" and "ignorant."*

Taliban commanders have stepped up their vicious campaign to intimidate or kill any Afghan civilians working for the Karzai government, aid agencies, women's groups, and even the UN. On January 18, militants launched a double suicide attack just yards from the presidential palace in central Kabul, provoking a gun battle in which three soldiers and two civilians were killed and more than seventy wounded. "We are now at a critical juncture.... The situation cannot continue as is if we are to succeed in Afghanistan," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told the UN Security Council earlier in the month. "There is a risk that the deteriorating overall situation will become irreversible," he added.

The prevailing view in Washington is that many Taliban fighters in the field can eventually be won over, but that the present US troop surge has to roll them back first, reversing Taliban successes and gaining control over the population centers and major roads. According to the current American strategy, the US military has to weaken the Taliban before negotiating with them. The commander of US and NATO forces, General Stanley McChrystal, has both a special fund of $1.5 billion to provide incentives and other forms of support to Taliban who put down their arms, and a group of British and American officers who are drawing up plans to win over Taliban commanders and fighters as the troop surge tilts the battlefield back in favor of the US. General McChrystal told me in Islamabad in early January that he is confident that many Taliban will be won over in the field. This US reconciliation effort would be led by Karzai, who for several years has called for talks with Taliban leaders.

There is another way of looking at the present crisis. Despite their successes, the Taliban are probably now near the height of their power. They do not control major population centers—nor can they, given NATO's military strength and air power. There are no countrywide, populist insurrections against NATO forces as there were against the coalition forces in Iraq. The vast majority of Afghans do not want the return of a Taliban regime despite their anger at the Karzai government and the general international failure to deliver economic progress. Many Afghans believe that as long as Western troops remain, there is still the hope that security can return and their lives change for the better.

Thus the next few months could offer a critical opportunity to persuade the Taliban that this is the best time to negotiate a settlement, because they are at their strongest.

3.

Both Generals McChrystal and David Petraeus, the head of the US military's Central Command, have said that they cannot shoot their way to victory. Obama is clear about defeating al-Qaeda, but he is more inclined toward negotiations with the Taliban. In his West Point speech in December, Obama said he supported Kabul's efforts to "open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens."

The present US military strategy aims to peel away Taliban commanders and fighters and resettle them without making any major political concessions or changes to the Afghan constitution. But Washington remains deeply divided about talking to the Taliban leaders. The State and Defense Departments, the White House, and the CIA all have different views about it, and there are also divisions between the US and its allies.

General McChrystal told me that many mid-level Taliban commanders and their men are waiting for Karzai to announce a reconciliation strategy before offering to change sides. "The reintegration of former Taliban into society offers a good chance to reduce the insurgency in Afghanistan...while al-Qaeda needs to be hunted and destroyed." Whether the US and its allies should hold talks with the Taliban leadership, he said, is a political decision to be made by Washington. In December Richard Holbrooke, the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told me that in his estimation some 70 percent of the Taliban fight for local reasons or money rather than because of ideological commitment to the movement, and they can be won over.

Meanwhile the Taliban have shown the first hint of flexibility, as suggested in a ten-page statement issued in November 2009 for the religious festival of Eid. The Taliban leader Mullah Omar, while urging his fighters to continue the jihad against "the arrogant [US] enemy," also pledged that a future Taliban regime would bring peace and noninterference from outside forces, and would pose no threat to neighboring countries—implying that al-Qaeda would not be returning to Afghanistan along with the Taliban. Sounding more like a diplomat than an extremist, Omar said, "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan wants to take constructive measures together with all countries for mutual cooperation, economic development and good future on the basis of mutual respect."

A week later, the Taliban's response to Obama's West Point speech again suggested a changed attitude. There was not a single mention of jihad or imposing Islamic law. Instead the Taliban spoke of a nationalist and patriotic struggle for Afghanistan's independence and said they were ready to give legal guarantee if the foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan." In a New Year's message the Taliban, while condemning the US surge, even seemed to empathize with Obama, observing that the American president faces "a great many problems and opposition" at home.

The Taliban's new tone can be traced to secret talks in the spring of 2009. Sponsored by Saudi Arabia at Karzai's request, the talks included former (or now retired) Taliban, former Arab members of al-Qaeda, and Karzai's representatives. No breakthrough took place, but the talks led to a series of visits to Saudi Arabia by important Taliban leaders during the rest of 2009. The US, British, and Saudi officials who were indirectly in contact with the Taliban there quickly encouraged them to renounce al-Qaeda and lay out their negotiating demands. In turn, the Taliban said that distancing themselves from al-Qaeda would require the other side to meet a principal demand of their own: that all foreign forces must announce a timetable to leave Afghanistan.

Istakhbarat, the Saudi intelligence service, is not set up to produce political results, but it has given the Taliban a safe venue to meet and it has acted as an interlocutor with Afghan government and Western officials. Significantly the ISI, which has demanded a key part in the negotiations from its erstwhile Saudi allies, has so far been left out at the request of both the Taliban and the Afghan government—neither of whom trust it. That now may be about to change. The key to more formal negotiations with Taliban leaders lies with Pakistan and the ISI.

4.

Tensions between the US and Pakistan have escalated in recent months as Washington demands that the Pakistani military "capture or kill" Afghan Taliban leaders as well as top militants in Pakistan. These include the Afghan Taliban leadership living in Quetta and Karachi, as well as their allies such as Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who live in North Waziristan in the tribal areas abutting Afghanistan. Pakistan says it is too busy dealing with its own acute problems with the Pakistani Taliban and a growing number of terrorist attacks by various insurgent groups. Its forces are overstretched, it has little money, and it will oblige the Americans only when it is ready to do so. In fact Pakistan would never launch a military offensive against the Afghan Taliban leaders since it has viewed them as potential allies in a post-American Afghanistan, when the US will probably ditch Pakistan as well.

Pakistan's military is deeply fearful of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan; the result could be civil war and mayhem in its backyard once again. "We want the American surge to succeed in Afghanistan, because if they don't we will pay the price," a senior Pakistani military officer told me. The army is also convinced that the US will eventually align itself with India and that it has allowed India to strengthen its influence in Kabul at Pakistan's expense. Despite all the sacrifices it has made for the Afghans over thirty years, supporting them against the Soviets, Pakistanis are now friendless in Afghanistan—except for the Afghan Taliban, who are more wary than friendly toward the ISI.

To regain influence in Afghanistan and drive the Indians out once the Americans leave, the Pakistan military could, as an alternative, back the Taliban in a plan to retake Kabul and set up a government that would do Pakistan's bidding. However that possibility is now too risky; the international community would never tolerate it, and such a regime would also provide a base from which the Pakistani Taliban could launch further attacks in Pakistan.

In a major policy shift, senior Pakistani military and intelligence officials say they have offered to help broker talks between Taliban leaders, the Americans, and Karzai. "We want the talks to start now, not in eighteen months when they are leaving; but the Americans have to trust and depend on us," a senior military officer told me. There is a deep lack of trust between the CIA and the ISI, and other countries may also balk at Pakistan's insistence that all negotiations should be channeled through the ISI. Pakistani officials suggest that if the ISI helps arrange talks, then independent contacts between Taliban leaders and the CIA, British intelligence (MI6), and Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) would have to stop. In return, Pakistani officials say only that they want to be sure "that Pakistan's national interests in Afghanistan are looked after"—interests that have yet to be clearly spelled out to the Americans and Afghans.

This is an important change in the official position of Pakistan. For the past nine years—despite the well-known connections between the ISI and the Afghan Taliban—Pakistan has denied that it has influence over the Taliban leaders, and openly playing host to them was considered out of the question. Pakistan will have to make serious efforts to gain the confidence of the US and the Afghans if it is to sponsor negotiations with the Taliban; but their differences could be worked out through arrangements made between the various intelligence agencies and governments involved. Senior US officials say that Pakistan is showing itself to be "more flexible" on Afghan policy than before.

How will the Taliban leaders respond? Many of them are fed up with years of ISI manipulation and strategizing on their behalf and would prefer to keep the ISI out of such talks. Some members of the Taliban have built up a rapport with Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, the domestic intelligence agency of the Kabul government. The NDS and the ISI loathe and mistrust each other, and the NDS would be extremely reluctant to allow the ISI a central part in negotiations. Moreover the crucial acceptance of reconciliation with the Taliban has to come from the non-Pashtun population in the north who are extremely hostile to the Taliban and the ISI. If the northern ethnic groups who make up just over 50 percent of the population do not accept the reconciliation plan, there could be a renewed civil war as in the 1990s.

But the ISI has power and influence over the Taliban. Not only are the Taliban able to resupply their fighters from Pakistan, and seek medical treatment and other facilities, but the families of most Taliban leaders live in Pakistan where they own homes and run businesses and shops. Taliban leaders travel to Saudi Arabia on Pakistani passports. All this makes them vulnerable to ISI pressure. Even before the US military can consider coopting mid-level Taliban commanders, both sides would have to ascertain how this would play with the ISI.

The Pakistani army's desperate desire to have some control over future events in Afghanistan is partly due to its strategic aim of avoiding encirclement by India; but it is also a result of the setbacks it has received since 2001. The military is still smarting from former President Bush's decisions to allow the anti-Pakistan Northern Alliance to take Kabul in 2001, to ignore Islamabad's later requests for consultations on US strategy in Afghanistan, and to treat all Afghan Pashtuns as potential Taliban. This helped radicalize Pakistan's own Pashtun population, which is more than twice the size of Afghanistan's. (There are 12 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan and 27 million in Pakistan.)

5.

Talking to the Taliban requires more than just secret cooperation among intelligence agencies or the CIA handing out bribes to Taliban commanders to change sides—as it did with the Northern Alliance in 2001. There is an urgent need for a publicly promoted strategy involving concrete efforts to build political institutions and provide humanitarian aid in ways that do not require intrusive Western control—a strategy that could attract many members of the Taliban, reduce violence, and placate Afghans who are opposed to all such compromises. Obama officials have talked up the need for such a public strategy but accomplished little during his first year in office. Yet such goals are of paramount importance.

Here are some suggestions of steps that should be taken in advance of talking to the Taliban. Almost all these points have theoretically been accepted by the US and NATO but none have been acted upon:

1. Convince Afghanistan's neighbors and other countries in the region to sign on to a reconciliation strategy with the Taliban, to be led by the Afghan government. Creating a regional strategy and consensus on Afghanistan was one of the primary aims of the Obama administration; but little has been achieved. From Iran to India, regional tensions are worse now than a year ago.

2. Allow Afghanistan to submit to the UN Security Council a request that the names of Taliban leaders be removed from a list of terrorists drawn up in 2001—so long as those leaders renounce violence and ties to al-Qaeda. Russia has so far refused to entertain such a request; but Obama has not tried hard enough to extract this concession from Russian leaders.

3. Pass a UN Security Council resolution giving the Afghan government a formal mandate to negotiate with the Taliban, and allow the US, NATO, and the UN to encourage that process. This would mean persuading reluctant countries like Russia and India to support such a resolution.

4. Have NATO and Afghan forces take responsibility for the security of Taliban and their families who return to Afghanistan, enlisting the help of international agencies such as the UN High Commission for Refugees or the International Committee of the Red Cross to work with the Afghan government to assist these returning Taliban members, arranging for compensation, housing, job training, and other needs they may have in facing resettlement.

5. Provide adequate funds, training, and staff for a reconciliation body, led by the Afghan government, that will work with Western forces and humanitarian agencies to provide a comprehensive and clearly spelled-out program for the security of the returning Taliban and for facilities to receive them.

6. Encourage the Pakistani military to assist NATO and Afghan forces in providing security to returning Taliban and their families and allow necessary cross-border support from international humanitarian agencies. Encourage Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to help the Taliban set up a legal political party, as other Afghan militants—such as former members of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami party—have done. This would be a tremendous blow to al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban and it would give concrete form to Obama's repeated pledge that he is ready to reach out to foes in the Muslim world.

7. The Taliban leadership should be provided with a neutral venue such as Saudi Arabia or elsewhere, where it can hold talks with the Afghan government and NATO. The US should release the remaining Afghan prisoners held at Guantánamo and allow them to go to either Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia.

Unless such publicly announced policies are carried out, the Taliban may well conclude that it is better and safer to sit out the next eighteen months, wait for the Americans to start leaving, and then, when they judge Afghanistan to be vulnerable, go for the kill in Kabul—although that would only lead to a renewed civil war.

6.

Just as Afghanistan faces a crucial choice, we have a book that for the first time places readers at the heart of the Taliban's way of thinking—My Life with the Taliban, by Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the former Taliban minister and ambassador to Pakistan, who spent over four years in Guantánamo prison. Originally published in Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns, the book has been beautifully translated and extensively edited for easier understanding by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Feliz Kuehn, two researchers who live in Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban.

Zaeef was born in 1968 and grew up in a small dusty village in Kandahar province. Like many Taliban, he came from a family of mullahs and grew up an orphan, having lost his parents at an early age. Economic development never penetrated such Afghan villages as his and daily life was centered on learning at the madrasa, farming, and sustaining the Pashtun tribal code of honor and revenge. His extended clan fled to Pakistan after the 1979 Soviet invasion, but at the age of fifteen he secretly returned home to fight the Soviets. In the 1980s he served under several commanders, including Mullah Omar.

Zaeef dramatically brings to life the extremely harsh conditions under which the Afghans fought—without food, medical aid, or enough ammunition, and under constant Soviet bombardment:

> *When I first joined the jihad I was fifteen years old. I did not know how to fire a Kalashnikov or how to lead men. I knew nothing of war. But the Russian front lines were a tough proving ground and...I eventually commanded several mujahedeen groups.*

After the Soviets left Afghanistan, Zaeef became a mullah in a small village near Kandahar. He describes how the situation deteriorated in the south as warlords and criminals extracted tolls from trucks on the road, kidnapped and raped women, and held young boys captive to become their forced lovers. Zaeef was one of the original Taliban; in the winter of 1994 he joined with like-minded young men to work out a strategy for dealing with the warlords.

He was and remains intensely loyal to Mullah Omar, who would, he writes,

> *listen to everybody with focus and respect for as long as they needed to talk, and would never seek to cut them off. After he had listened, he then would answer with ordered, coherent thoughts.*

When Zaeef attended the founding meeting of the Taliban, each man took an oath of loyalty to Omar. That oath is still in effect, which is why no senior Taliban commander has ever betrayed the whereabouts of Omar. As the Taliban started to conquer Afghanistan, Zaeef was promoted from one job to the next.

After the Taliban capture of Kabul in 1996, Zaeef was moved to the defense ministry where, he writes, the weekly budget for the various Taliban militias fighting the Northern Alliance was $300,000 a week, or just $14 million a year. By 1999 when the Taliban controlled 80 percent of the country, their entire annual budget was just $80 million—from the Islamic taxes the Taliban imposed as well as donations from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, after 1996, Osama bin Laden (although Zaeef does not mention his contribution). He describes a chaotic and uncoordinated government:

> The budget didn't even come close to what was needed in order to start any serious development; it was like a drop of water that falls on a hot stone, evaporating without leaving any trace.

Early in his book Zaeef describes his intense hatred for the ISI, which deepened in 2000 when he was appointed Taliban ambassador to Pakistan. He claims he resisted being recruited by the ISI. "In my dealings with them I tried to be not so sweet that I would be eaten whole, and not so bitter that I would be spat out." He describes

how "the ISI extended its roots deep into Afghanistan like a cancer puts down roots in the human body," and how "every ruler of Afghanistan complained about it, but none could get rid of it." Zaeef set up his own clandestine network of Pakistani officials who provided him information about what the ISI was planning regarding the Taliban.

What Zaeef omits or fudges is significant. He makes no mention of the ISI's financial and material support to the Taliban, and says hardly anything about al-Qaeda or how his hero Mullah Omar became so close to Osama bin Laden. He has nothing to say about the Taliban's repressive attitudes toward women, including the ban on their education, and he makes no mention of the Taliban's harsh punishments, including public stonings.

By 2001, after UN sanctions restricted the Taliban's international contacts, Zaeef became the only Taliban leader who could meet with US and Western envoys. His relationship with the US embassy in Islamabad was dominated by American demands to hand over Osama bin Laden. In the days after September 11, he frantically tried to stave off the impending US attack on his country by appealing to Western embassies, writing letters to the UN, and trying to enlist support from Islamic countries. He met with Mullah Omar, who was convinced that the Americans would not dare attack. In Omar's mind, Zaeef writes, "there was less than a 10 percent chance that America would resort to anything beyond threats and so an attack was unlikely."

In January 2002 he was turned over to the Americans by the ISI—sold, according to him—and ended up in Guantánamo. He now lives in Kabul under government protection and his final plea is for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. He says he does not believe in al-Qaeda, but speaks as an Afghan patriot with strong Islamist leanings toward the Taliban. Afghanistan, he writes, is "a family home in which we all have the right to live...without discrimination and while keeping our values. No one has the right to take this away from us." Can Afghanistan ever be a peaceful home for all Afghans? They certainly deserve it.

- January 20, 2010

Notes

*See Noah Shachtman, "'Afghan Insurgency Can Sustain Itself Indefinitely': Top U.S. Intel Officer," *Wired*.com, January 8, 2010. General Flynn's briefing, called "*State of the Insurgency: Trends, Intentions and Objectives*," was presented on December 23, 2009. Also see "NATO Official: US Spy Work Lacking in Afghanistan," Associated Press, January 5, 2010.